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Notes on Cinema

By Francoise Pfaff

In many parts of the United States, African film festivals and lectures on films from the continent have increased in popularity in recent years. On the East Coast alone, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the American Film Institute in Washington, D. C., and at several campuses—among them Howard University and the University of the District of Columbia—have presented selected works of the newly emerged African cinema.

Looking at the Sub-Saharan production since the early 1960s (about 200 feature films), it appears that the greatest number of films (about one-third) were by Senegalese filmmakers. These films have also proven that quality can match quantity. This article will focus, for the most part, on Senegalese cinema as the most representative example of this new medium. Films from the continent strive to give the world a more authentic vision of Africa by Africans. We find them breaking away from the previous "exotic" clichés through which Western films depicted Africa.

Paradoxically, *Afrique-sur-Seine* (Africa on the Seine River), the first film by Africans was made in Paris in 1955 by a group of students, including Paulin Soumanou Vieyra and Mamadou Sarr of Senegal. The 20-minute black and white film illustrated the lives of African students in Paris. Although somewhat weakened by its over-lyrical and sentimental tone, *Afrique-sur-Seine* reflected the aspirations and the frustrations commonly found amidst uprooted youth in a foreign land.

In spite of earlier beginnings, it is mainly since the early 1960s that Senegalese cinema has started to define itself through the works of directors such as Vieyra, Momar Thiam, Ousmane Sembene, Ababacar Samb, Yves Diagne and Mahama Johnson

Traore. As it happens frequently in Africa, these directors are filmmakers as well as scriptwriters. For example, Sembene, first a writer, came to film because he aspired to reach a broader audience through the medium. He adapted his films from his own literary works—*Black Girl* (1966), *The Money Order* (1968), and *Xala* (1974). Thiam and a few others based some of their films on the works of other well-known Senegalese authors.

Besides illustrating the written word, films play an important role in Senegal in terms of reaching a wider range of people in a country where the illiteracy rate is high. Also, films are more appreciated because they are closer to the oral tradition of Africa than literature—a collective experience based on audiovisual elements with facets similar to the griot's story-telling.

The themes mostly found in Senegalese cinema deal with social problems of modern times, such as the clash between modern concepts and old traditions, neocolonialism, unemployment, poverty and complicated bureaucracy.

In Senegal, cinema has many purposes to fulfill. Beside being a means of expression and communication, it is also a means of education. It raises the awareness of the people to the problems of their nation. It teaches them about the rich heritage of a common past which has often been ignored or betrayed by the Western media.

"African cinema is made by Africans for Africans," says Vieyra, one of the pioneers of African cinema. He stresses: "We cannot define our cinema according to European concepts but only according to African concepts. When I was young, we were taught more about French history than the history of our own countries. Now we have to assert ourselves as Africans while demystifying Europe's definition of Africa."

As one considers the various forms of traditional African art, one notices that art in Africa has always been functional and a part of the people's lives. For instance, masks were originally created for religious and social ceremonies—not for decorative purposes as is the case today. African films primarily derive from this same traditional principle of functional art. According to Thiam, another Senegalese director: "The role of the Senegalese filmmaker is to inform the people. One must communicate through images since everybody here cannot read."

Presently, the most prolific and the most acclaimed Senegalese director is Sembene. For him, "The African filmmaker is like the griot who is similar to the European medieval minstrel: a man of learning and common sense who is the historian, the raconteur, the living memory and the conscience of his people. The filmmaker must live within his society and say what goes wrong within his society. Why does the filmmaker have such a role? Because like many other artists, he is maybe more sensitive than other people. Artists know the magic of words, sounds and colors and they use these elements to illustrate what others think and feel. The filmmaker must not live secluded in an ivory tower, he has a definite social function to fulfill."

Likewise, Ababacar Samb, who is now the president of the Senegalese Association of Filmmakers, noted: "Cinema is a weapon because it can help the development of our countries since it can be used as a means of promotion and information." And, Diagne, who now heads the Senegalese Film Bureau, emphasized: "African cinema should be present at all the stages of development of our countries. Films should deal with political, social and economical issues."

Mahama Johnson Traore, the General Secretary of the Pan African Federation

of cinema, belongs to the second generation of Senegalese filmmakers. Yet, his philosophy derives from the positions already taken by his elders. For him, "Senegalese cinema must neither be escapist nor post-card oriented. The filmmaker is a man who is lucky enough to own a means of expression and to know how to master a specific technology. His role is to put that technology at the disposal of ideas received within his socio-cultural environment. Third World cinema, and African cinema in particular, should be political. I don't condemn those who make entertainment films if these films don't try to impose on us a way of life which is not ours. I am totally against escapist films of the James Bond type, that present to us life styles which are out of our reach. One should not cheat people and make them believe in false truths and fantasies."

As noted before, the primordial concern of the Senegalese filmmakers is that their films be more cultural than commercial. They depict the history and the present reality of their country, and in so doing they do not avoid sensitive issues. Their often blunt and caustic criticism of contemporary problems occasionally meets with government disapproval. *Lambaaye*, a film made in 1972 by Traore, which describes corruption at various government levels, has been partially forbidden in Senegal. *Ceddo*, made in 1976 by Sembene about Catholic and Muslim imperialism in Africa, has only been seen in certain foreign countries. Yet, nothing better than a selection of some Senegalese films can be used to reflect the various thematic trends of Senegalese cinema.

Borom Sarrett, a 20-minute black and white film is, according to many, the real starting point of Senegalese film esthetics. In this moving story of a day in the life of a Dakar cart-man, Sembene uses soberness and simple narration reminiscent of Italian neo-realism. We

meet here some of the cart-man's customers: an unemployed worker, a crippled beggar and a dishonest civil servant. At the end of the day, Sembene's protagonist returns home penniless, after having given all of his earnings to a griot who flattered him by singing the embellished past glories of the cart-man's family lineage. His wife goes out, leaving her husband with the children. She tells him: "I promise you we will eat tonight." Here the director skillfully ends his film—leaving the audience free to make their conclusion. Thus, we are made to wonder what crafty trade is envisaged by the cart-man's wife. Following in the steps of Sembene, we find Cheik Bah N'Gaido describing, in his first film, *The Brush* (1973), the hardships suffered by the urban working class. This film illustrates with great sensitivity the difficult life of a young Dakar shoe-shiner who supports a family.

Many young Africans often travel to Europe to further their education or to work as unskilled laborers. One of Sembene's most significant films, *Black Girl*, is precisely about the life of a young maid hired by a young French couple in Senegal. They take her to France where she is ill-treated. Her linguistical isolation and her cultural alienation lead her to suicide.

It has often been observed that when the young African expatriates go back to their country, they experience a difficult reintegration in their former society. Filmmaker Samb, who studied for many years in Europe, is very familiar with their problems of cultural alienation and assimilation. Both problems are present in his film, *Et la Neige n'était plus* (There was No Longer Snow—1965). This is how Samb describes his first film: "The critics said that it is the story of a young man who has lived in Western countries for a long time. The theories and the ideas he received in Europe are in direct contradiction with

what he sees here. The African world to which he returns is both traditional and oriented towards the systematic imitation of the West. He is caught between two worlds but he will remain faithful to the African tradition. He will be able to retain the traditional values and at the same time accept the progressive changes."

In *Niaye* (1964), Sembene tells with great insight and feeling the story of a young girl confronted by village traditions and taboos. Here, it is through the griot's mouth that we learn about the sequence of events which affected the village, namely incest and a murder.

In *Kodou* (1971), Samb acquaints us with a young girl who does not want to be tattooed, thus breaking away from tradition. "She escapes and is then rejected by the group," notes Samb. "This young girl becomes insane. She is taken to the European doctors who cannot find any cure for her sickness, which is cultural. She is then taken to the village witchdoctor, who—through various rituals—reintegrates her into this social group."

Niaye and *Kodou* illustrate the psychological problems which are issued from the African tradition. The problems of the African women is another source for filmmakers.

"Africa cannot develop without the active participation of its women who have frequently taken part in the various colonial uprisings which occurred in Africa," stresses Sembene. "There cannot be any total liberation of our societies without the liberation of the African woman. Her role as a transmitter of values to our youth must not be undervalued." On this subject, Traore has directed two films featuring the changing status of the Senegalese woman at the various stages of her life: *Diankha-Bi* (The Young Girl 1969) and *Diegue-Bi* (The Young Woman 1971).

28 Youth is also another area of interest in Senegalese cinema. The most successful films devoted to this topic are *Badou Boy* (1970), by Djibril Diop Mambety and *Njangaane* (1975), by Traore. The first film relates the adventures of a young boy who escaped from a reformatory school and is sought after by the police. On the other hand, *Njangaane*, according to its author, is "A film which deals with the education of children in Koranic schools where they are sometimes beaten and exploited by the marabout. It deals with the problems of the children and their parents. The children are forced to beg in the streets by their teachers to pay for their education and the parents strongly believe that the Koranic schools are best. My film does not attack religion. It denounces the exploitation of children in the name of religion. I do not denounce religion but how it is used."

Most Senegalese films deal with contemporary situations. This is not due to lack of interest in historical subjects; it is caused by the stark reality that the Senegalese cinema cannot yet afford to indulge into expensive historical screen epics. But two films, *Emitai* (1971) and *Ceddo*, both by Sembene, have their plot based on the Senegalese past. *Emitai* (God of Thunder) takes place in the early 1940s. It relates the rebellion of a Casamance village, spearheaded by the women, who defiantly protest against the increasing demands of the French colonial power during the Second World War. *Ceddo* illustrates the various forces which are present in a small village at the time of the slave trade. Through this study of political and religious expansion (mostly Muslim), the audience is brought to question those legitimate political structures which permitted, and in some instances invited, foreign powers to penetrate the African continent.

The past offers Sembene a broad field for reflection. In a lecture at Howard University in 1975, he said: "We must

understand our past and our traditions before we can hope to understand ourselves."

In Senegal, cinema does not only contribute to analytical or critical analysis of history, it also records old traditions which are vanishing in a changing world. Here, cinema is also considered as a means of documenting the past or the present for future generations. In 1961, Blaise Senghor recorded on film the yearly pilgrimage of the Mourid Muslims to the Mosque of Touba. In 1966, for the First Festival of Negro Art held in Dakar, Diagne made a pictorial illustration of president Leopold Senghor's concept of Negritude. His documentary on African art, *De Thyossane* (Back to the Sources), places the mask in its original social context. "The African art object is not what has been defined in Europe. It is not a decorative item. We wanted to show that it played a role within our society. Europe has desacralized the mask and this is what we tried to explain in this film" says Diagne. In the same vein, one notices *Les Ballèts de la Forêt Sacrée de Casamance* (The Ballets of the Sacred Forest of Casamance), a 1970 documentary where the dancers are wearing masks as they were originally intended.

Traditions are also embodied in sports. Filmmaker Thiam depicts the various facets of Casamance wrestling in which the fighter has to win twice to be proclaimed the victor. Besides *Luttes Casamançaises* (1968), Thiam has also made in 1969 *Simb ou les Jeux du Faux Lion* (Simb or the False Lion's Games) about traditional Wolof games. "Here, the main protagonist," he explains, "is a man who has been wounded by a lion and who subsequently imitates his aggressor. This game is organized by the women."

Before Thiam, Diagne became—in 1965—the first Senegalese director to show interest in filming sports. Diagne

summarizes his approach in such terms: "I made a film called *L'Afrique en Piste* (Africa Gets on the Track) about sports and yet it is also a political film. I wanted to show what cinema could bring to Africa. I thought that sports had a great role to play in the development of our youth. They provide us with good examples of courage, tenacity, discipline and humanism. I made this film in France while young Senegalese athletes were getting their training for the Tokyo Olympic Games. I measured the distance which existed between the training of young people from developed countries and the training of our own youth. We had to face this reality in order to create proper athletic training centers in Senegal instead of sending our athletes abroad. A film had to be made to improve the politics of sports in our country. Then, this film was presented to many African discussion groups and conventions and it made people aware of our needs in the realm of sports."

Senegalese films are mainly low budget, costing anywhere from \$8,000 for *Karim*, made in 1970 by Thiam, to \$500,000 for *Ceddo*, made in 1976 by Sembene—the most expensive film ever made in Senegal. Both are full-length films, with the latter being technicolor. The average cost of a color film is generally around \$50,000. (*Baks*, made in 1974 by Thiam cost \$80,000).

Senegalese films are processed abroad since there are no local film laboratories, and they face difficulties at the distribution level. The government is now showing willingness to support independent filmmakers. For instance, it organized the Cinema Bureau in 1972 for the purpose of aiding film production. In 1974, the Senegalese Society for the Importation, Distribution and Exportation of Films was established to strengthen the young film industry. And, the government has just voted the creation of a national film library.

In a broader scope, great hopes are also placed in the Pan African Federation of Cinema (Fe Pa Ci), whose aim is to organize filmmakers in an attempt to solve distribution problems.

Senegalese cinema is diversified. However, beyond its various themes, one observes some esthetic and philosophical similarities. Is it relevant to envision the concept of a Senegalese school of cinema? Most Senegalese directors seem to think that such a concept is premature. For them, a larger number of films is necessary to define Senegalese cinema in comparison with other national cinemas. They also underline that no film has been produced in Senegal since 1976 because of lack of adequate financing. Samba Sakho, a young director, states: "I must admit that I am a little worried. Senegal is more advanced in filmmaking than many African countries but in the last three years we have experienced hard times. A filmmaker has to keep making films. He cannot afford to stay idle for a long period of time or else his creativity is going to be affected."

Other filmmakers see the past three years as a period of reflection on what was made and on what will be done. This concluding statement is formulated by Diagne: "Some people have said that Senegalese cinema is stagnating, others have said that it goes backwards. I disagree! If we had the means to make many films during those past three years, what kind of films would we have produced? I think that one must have a time for reflection and time to see what the public thinks of our films. We have to see what their impact has been up to now. Are we on the right track? We have to prepare and organize ourselves and from battle to battle we will win."

Senegalese cinema may need a few more years to expand; its honest and functional approach to filmmaking leaves way for great expectations. □

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Books

OBEAH: The God of Voodoo

By Ted Cooper
Nuclassics and Science Publishing Company
Washington, D. C., 316 pp. \$8.95

Reviewed by Carole W. Singleton

Against the mysterious world of necromancy and rituals, which are both spiritually and sensuously arousing, Ted Cooper creates an intriguing experience of Obeahism—voodoo. "Voodooism: a religion derived from African ancestor worship, practiced chiefly by Negroes of Haiti and characterized by propitiatory rites and communication by trance with animistic deities . . . in other words, the practice of black magic." This is the academic definition provided by Monsieur Oliphant in Cooper's *Obeah: The God of Voodoo*, which reflects the author's respect for voodooism and his personal belief that necromancy is not far from what the Western world calls religion.

This suspenseful novel, set against a backdrop of obscure and exotic cultural beliefs, commands respect for the worship of voodoo and peaks the reader's curiosity. It tells the story of Roman Cass, who travels from Miami to Key West, Florida, to find the evidence to prove that he and his mother are the rightful heirs to his grandmother Beatrice Brown's fortune.

The source of the major conflict is Cass' aunt Olivia, who has contested the will. We later learn that Olivia is a voodoo priestess who has engineered a multitude of evil machinations through Obeah. Upon arrival, Cass becomes

involved with mysterious characters and situations.

His first encounter is with a Mr. Oliphant, whom Cass had met earlier at his grandmother's funeral. No sooner does Cass meet this odd, old gentleman that he disappears through the rear door of his ramshackle herbs and roots shop. As Cass contemplates a wooden wall carving of Obeah, God Loa, a younger Oliphant, DuVal, appears as mysteriously as the elder one had disappeared.

While visiting the mysterious Oliphants, Cass is advised to stay the night and read a "book" which DuVal insists will help him to understand how Obeah—with a little help from Olivia—killed Cass' grandmother. The "book," which seems to hold the key to Cass' mystery, is the story of Frenchie, Master Oliphant's Black, educated ward and chief slave on the island of Martinique. This inner novel becomes Cass' "cross" because it holds the key to the mystery he must solve in order to ascertain the rightful heirs to the fortune. This inner novel, while providing an informative slave history of the Cass family background, also reinforces the efficiency and influence of Obeahism.

Cooper, a playwright as well as novelist, skillfully leads the reader into the "book" much like a play within a play. Written with a keen sense of foreboding, Cooper's novel is provocative enough to prod even the most passive reader into personal research on the art and practice of voodooism. Descriptive passages such as the following from Frenchie's story create graphically in the mind's eye of the reader the ritual of Obeah:

The woman threw her arms in the air, her body continuously moving. The chicken was kicking and the machette shivered while the light from the flames danced off its blade. . . . The chanting was more intense. "Obeah! Obeah! Obeah!" The woman twirled around, letting the chicken